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THE COLONIAL POST-OFFICE

THE first arrangements of a postal character introduced into the North American colonies were made for the purpose of amending defects in private arrangements which had been in operation since the foundation of the colonies. From the time the Dutch settled on Manhattan Island and on the shores of the Hudson, and the English in Virginia and Massachusetts, continuous though irregular communication was maintained with the respective mother-countries by means of trading vessels. On the European side the arrangements were subject to few inconveniences. If the sailing-masters, on their arrival in Holland and England, were regardful of their trust, they would see that the letters placed in their mail-bags by the colonists were posted at the nearest post-office, and the postal systems in those countries could be depended on to do the rest. With the colonists the situation was less happy. As there were no post-offices, those sending or expecting letters had to depend on their own exertions or on the precarious goodwill of friends for information as to the time of arrival or departure of vessels, and for the necessary visits to the vessels. The first colony to apply a remedy for these inconveniences was Massachusetts Bay. On November 5, 1639, the general court of that colony issued an ordinance¹ directing that all letters arriving at Boston from beyond seas should be taken to Richard Fairbank's tavern. Fairbank's tavern seems to have been something of a public institution. Returns to the surveyor-general were made there and committees on trade and on other public matters held their meetings in its rooms. Fairbank undertook to make a proper delivery of the letters received by him, and he was authorized to take as compensation a penny for each letter so delivered. But the ordinance went further and in a qualified way conferred on him the other functions of a postmaster. He was licensed to accept letters from citizens for despatch across the sea, but the court were not minded to bestow a monopoly on him. The ordinance laid it down plainly that "no man shall be compelled to bring his letters thither except he please".

The Dutch West India Company, which governed New Netherland, made somewhat similar provision against the delays and failures in the delivery of its correspondence. In a letter² to the

¹ *Collections of the Mass. Hist. Soc.*, third series, VII. 48.

² *New York Colonial Documents*, XIV. 186.

director-general of New Netherland written on August 6, 1652, the directors in Amsterdam state that, having observed that "private parties give their letters to this or that sailor or free merchant, which letters to their great disadvantage are often lost through neglect, remaining forgotten in the boxes or because one or the other removes to another place", they have had a box set up at their place of meeting in which all letters may be deposited for despatch by the first ship sailing; and they advise that the same measure be taken in New Amsterdam. In 1659 they became peremptory, and ordered that any sailing-master found carrying letters otherwise than in the sealed bag made up for him at the company's offices, should be subject to a fine of one hundred guilders for each offense.³

The lack of common interests among the colonial groups accounts for the absence of an inland postal system, but there were two occasions before the issue of the Neale patent when the presence of a common danger drew the groups together, and each time the question of communications among them by regular posts was agitated. On the outbreak of the war between the English and their maritime rivals, the Dutch, in 1672, Governor Lovelace, at the direction of the king, set on foot inquiries as to what could be done towards establishing a regular postal service throughout the colonies. He arranged for a monthly courier service between New York and Boston.⁴ There was no road between the two places and Governor Winthrop was asked to provide an expert woodsman, who might guide the courier by the easiest road. The courier was directed to blaze the route, and it was hoped that a good road might be made over it. The courier had made only a few trips when New York was captured by a Dutch fleet. The town was restored to the English in 1674 but, with the disappearance of the danger, the service was dropped.

The other occasion was in 1684, when the pressure of the French and their Indian allies brought together all the colonies into a conference at Albany, at which the Iroquois took part. Colonel Dongan, governor of New York, threw out the proposition to establish a line of post-houses along the coast from the Acadian boundary to Carolina. The king was much pleased with the scheme, and directed Dongan to farm out the enterprise to some capable contractor.⁵ In March, 1685, he had an ordinance adopted in the

³ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁴ *Coll.*, Mass. Hist. Soc., fifth series, IX. 83-84.

⁵ *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial, America and West Indies*, 1681-1685, no. 1848.

council of New York,⁶ providing for a post-office through the colonies, and fixing the charges for the conveyance of letters at threepence for each one hundred miles of carriage. Dongan's jurisdiction did not however extend beyond the colony of New York and the records of the other colonies are silent on the subject. No evidence has been discovered to show that the extensive scheme contemplated was carried into effect but it is tolerably certain that a regular service was in operation between New York and Boston. The narrative of the grievances against the tyrannical misrule of the usurper Leisler contains a statement that on January 16, 1690, the public post on his way to Boston was detained by a warrant from Leisler and his letters confiscated, and the terms of the statement make it clear that the post was a regular institution.⁷

In July, 1683, a weekly post was established in Pennsylvania. Letters were carried from Philadelphia to the Falls of Delaware for threepence; to Chester for twopence; to New Castle for fourpence; and to Maryland for sixpence.⁸

As part of the scheme of James II. for the confederation of the New England states under a royal governor, a postmaster was appointed for the united colonies. The choice fell upon Edward Randolph, who had just previously been selected as secretary and registrar of the new province. The appointment was dated November 23, 1685.⁹ He seems to have performed the duties of his office¹⁰ until the fall of the Andros government, which followed closely upon the deposition of James II. in 1689.

Until this time, then, the post-office would be classed generally among the merely temporary conveniences of the state, and not among its permanent institutions. It was William III. who established the first postal system in the colonies. When he had become firmly seated on his throne and had an opportunity to look about, the affairs of the North American colonies engaged his attention. They had been growing rapidly, and at the end of the period of the Revolution in England the population was estimated at about 200,000. The greater part of the increase was in the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, though the colonies of Maryland and Virginia showed considerable gain,

⁶ Quoted by Miss M. E. Woolley in *Early History of the Colonial Post-Office*, as from *N. Y. Col. Docs.*, vol. III. Miss Woolley's essay is in the *Publications* of the Rhode Island Hist. Soc., 1894, and is reprinted in the *Papers from the Historical Seminary of Brown University* (ed. J. Franklin Jameson).

⁷ *N. Y. Col. Docs.*, III. 682.

⁸ Winsor, *Narr. and Crit. Hist. of Am.*, III. 492.

⁹ *Edward Randolph*, I. 270 (*Publications* of the Prince Society).

¹⁰ "Our letters that come by post now pass through hands of Councillour Randolph", Samuel Sewall to Thomas Glover, July 15, 1686. *Sewall Letter-Books*, I. 21.

and a beginning was made in the settlement of the Carolinas. The king resolved to have postal communication between Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. In 1691 he granted a patent¹¹ to the Master of the Mint, Thomas Neale, empowering him to establish a postal service between these colonies, and to open post-offices in the chief places. Neale seems to have been one of those parasitic creatures who manage to bask in court favor and to batten upon sinecures. He was at one time or another, and to a large extent simultaneously, master of the mint; groom porter to Charles II., in which capacity he was authorized to license and suppress gaming houses; conductor of government lotteries; patentee of the postal service in America; and commissioner of wrecks on the coast of Bermuda.¹² If the deputies he chose to conduct all these offices were as adequate to their duties as his deputy postmaster-general in America, the public service at least would not suffer from his pluralism.

Neale's patent as postmaster-general of the British possessions in America is a document of great importance and, if extraneous circumstances had not cut its life short, was well fitted to be the charter of the American post-office. The patent, which had a duration of twenty-one years, authorized Neale to establish a postal system throughout the British possessions in America. It prescribes in all needful detail the functions of such a service and gives him the exclusive privilege of letter conveyance within the territory covered by the system. Neale was obligated to see that the post-office was carried on efficiently; in case of dissatisfaction or of his failure to set the service on foot within two years the patent was to be determined. The postage charges were to be based on the rates in operation in England, or to be such other rates "as the planters and others will freely give for their letters or packets upon the first settlement of such office or offices". Letters for England, which are excepted from the monopoly, if sent from American post-offices, were to be fully prepaid to the first post-office in England, where they would be subject to the inland charges in that country. For the privileges conferred by the patent Neale was to pay nothing, except the nominal sum of six shillings and eight pence, which was to be remitted to the Exchequer each year at the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel.

Neale appointed as his deputy Andrew Hamilton, an Edinburgh merchant, who after seven years' residence in New Jersey was made

¹¹ A complete copy of the patent appears as an appendix to *The Early History of the Colonial Post Office*, by Miss Woolley.

¹² *Dict. of National Biography*, art., "Thomas Neale", and *Publications of the Prince Society*, VII. 385, note.

governor of that province in 1692. It was on April 4 of that year that he was made deputy postmaster-general. Neale was fortunate in his selection. Hamilton's course in relation to the post-office shows him to have been a man of energy and ability, with diplomatic powers of a high order. His success in his dealings with the colonial legislatures leaves no doubt on these points.

The patent furnished him with no warrant for high-handedness in carrying out its terms. He was authorized simply "to take such rates and sums of money as the planters shall agree to give". During the year 1692 Hamilton addressed himself to the legislatures of the colonies within the scope of his scheme, setting forth his plan, and begging that they might "ascertain and establish such rates and terms as should tend to quicker maintenance of mutual correspondence among the neighboring colonies and plantations, and that trade and commerce might be better preserved". The several legislatures looked on the proposition with favor, and Hamilton prepared a bill which he submitted for their consideration. This bill provided for a general post-office or chief letter-office in the principal town of each colony, the postmaster of which was to be appointed by Hamilton. As the patent conferred a monopoly on the holder, the proposed bill confirmed this monopoly, imposing considerable penalties for its infringement. The postal charges, as well as the privileges and appurtenances to be granted to postmasters and mail couriers, were settled between Hamilton and each of the legislatures. There was some variety in the privileges allowed to postmasters and couriers. In Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, the mail couriers were conceded free ferriage over the rivers and water courses which lay along their routes. In the acts passed by New York and New Hampshire there was no mention of ferriage, but in each a somewhat curious exemption is made in favor of the postmasters, that they should not be subject to excise charges on the ale and other liquors which formed the stock-in-trade of their business as innkeepers. The postmasters in all the colonies were exempted from public services, such as keeping watch and ward and sitting on juries. Shipmasters on arriving at a port with letters in their care, were enjoined to deliver them to the nearest post-office, where they would receive one half-penny for each letter.¹³

The principal postal rates were as follows. On letters from Europe or from any country beyond sea, if for Massachusetts, New

¹³ The several colonial acts were as follows: New York, passed November 11, 1692 (*Laws of Colony of N. Y.*, I. 293); Massachusetts, June 9, 1693 (ch. 3, 1 sess., 1693, *Province Laws*, I. 115); Pennsylvania, May 15, June 1, 1693 (*Duke of York's Laws*, p. 224); New Hampshire, June 5, 1693 (*N. H. Prov. Laws*, p. 561); Connecticut, May 10, 1694 (*Pub. Rec. of Conn.*, 1689-1706, p. 123).

Hampshire, or Pennsylvania, twopence; if for New York, nine pence. Letters passing between Boston and Philadelphia, and New York and Philadelphia were charged fifteen pence, and four and one-half pence respectively. There was a peculiarity in the postage on letters passing between Boston and New York. It differed according to the direction the letter was carried. A letter from New York to Boston cost twelve pence; while nine pence was the charge from Boston to New York. This was one of the consequences of the separate negotiations between Hamilton and the different legislatures. The Massachusetts act fixed the rates on letters to Boston, while the New York act settled the charge on letters going to New York. From Virginia to Philadelphia, to New York, and to Boston, the charges were nine pence, twelve pence, and two shillings respectively. All the acts concurred in the stipulation that letters on public business should be carried free of charge.

The foregoing is the substance of the acts passed in New York and Pennsylvania. Massachusetts went a step further. While as willing as the others to concede a monopoly of letter conveyance to Hamilton, it thought fit to impose on him the obligation of providing a satisfactory service. Accordingly, the Massachusetts legislature after authorizing Hamilton to establish a post-office in Boston, fixing the charges, and conferring on him the exclusive privilege of letter-carrying, added a clause binding him to maintain constant posts for the carriage of letters to the several places mentioned in the act, to deliver letters faithfully and seasonably, and imposed a fine of five pounds for each omission. In order to place a check on the post-office, the postmaster was required to mark on each letter the date of its receipt in his office. New Hampshire followed Massachusetts in inserting this clause in its Post-Office Act.

The four acts were sent to London, and submitted to the king in council for sanction. The acts of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire passed council, and became law, while on the advice of the governors of the post-office, the Massachusetts act was disallowed.¹⁴ The grounds for the discrimination against Massachusetts are difficult to understand. The Massachusetts act undoubtedly contained departures from the terms of the patent, but they were such departures as might be expected where an act is drawn up by a person unlearned in the law, who, having the patent before him, aims at substantial rather than at literal conformity therewith. There can be no question that the drafts presented to

¹⁴ Note to this effect attached to the act (ch. 3, 1 sess., 1693, *Province Laws*, I. 117).

the several assemblies were prepared by one person. Their practical identity establishes the fact. There can be equally little doubt that the draftsman was Hamilton himself. The governors of the post-office, who framed the objections,¹⁵ note first that the patent provides that the appointment of Neale's deputy shall, at his request, be made by the postmaster-general; whereas the Massachusetts act appears to appoint Andrew Hamilton postmaster-general of the colonies independent of the postmaster-general of England and not subject to the patent. The patent requires Neale to furnish accounts at stated intervals to enable the Treasury to establish the profits from the enterprise; it also stipulates for the cancellation of the patent in certain cases. Both these terms are omitted from the act. Insufficient care was taken in safeguarding the post-office revenue, and no provision was made for a successor in case of the removal of Hamilton from his position.

The points to which the post-office drew attention were, as will be seen, far from wanting weight, and if they had not been pressed against the Massachusetts bill alone, would have excited little comment. But the Massachusetts general court noted and resented the discrimination. When Neale was informed of the disallowance he begged the governors of the post-office to prepare a bill which they would regard as free from objections, and to lend their efforts to have it accepted by Massachusetts.¹⁶ A bill was drawn up and Lord Bellomont, the governor of New England, was instructed to invite the favorable consideration of the Massachusetts legislature to it.¹⁷ The bill was laid before the general court on June 3, 1699, and it was ordered to be transcribed and read.¹⁸ Five days later it came up for consideration, but it was resolved that the committee on the bill should "sit this afternoon",¹⁹ and it appeared in the assembly no more. The rejection of the bill, however, was of little or no practical consequence. The post-office was too great a convenience to be refused, and so it was established and conducted as if the bill were in operation, except that it had no monopoly in that colony. But the legislature, which was evidently desirous of extending in its own way all reasonable aid to Hamilton, passed an order in 1703²⁰ requiring shipmasters to deliver all letters they brought with them from over sea, at the post-office of the place of their arrival, for which they were to receive a half-penny each from

¹⁵ *Cal. St. P. Col., Am. and W. I.*, 1693-1696, no. 2234.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1696-1697, no. 505.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 1286.

¹⁸ *Prov. Laws of Mass.*, I. 263.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

²⁰ *Coll.*, Mass. Hist. Soc., third series, VII. 64.

the postmaster. Massachusetts equally with the other colonies made an annual grant to the post-office for the conveyance of its public letters.

The narrative so far deals only with the northern colonies, but the proposition for a post-office was submitted to Virginia and Maryland as well. These colonies were approached directly by the English court, and they were without the advantage of the draft bill which was laid before the legislatures of the other colonies and of Hamilton's advocacy. In the minutes of council of both governments²¹ it is recorded that the proposition was presented to them by the queen. This fact will account for the way it was treated in these colonies. When the scheme was submitted to the house of delegates of Maryland on May 13, 1695,²² it was set aside and nothing more was heard of it.

Virginia gave the proposition from the queen attentive consideration, though the ultimate results were no greater than had been obtained in Maryland. There had been since 1658 an arrangement for the transmission of letters concerning the public affairs of the colony.²³ An order was issued that year by the council that all letters superscribed for the public service should be conveyed from plantation to plantation to the place and person named, and the penalty for delaying any such letter was fixed at a hogshead of tobacco. No arrangements of a systematic nature were made for the conveyance of private letters. When advice of the patent for a post-office reached Virginia, the colony showed immediate interest. The council, on January 12, 1693, appointed Peter Heyman deputy postmaster,²⁴ and proceeded to draw up a post-office act. This act, which became law on April 3, 1693,²⁵ authorized Neale to establish a postal system in the colony at his own expense. He was to set up a general post-office at some convenient place and settle one or more sub-post-offices in each county. As letters were posted in the colony or reached it from abroad, they were to be forthwith dispersed, carried, and delivered in accordance with the directions they bore, and all letters for England were to be despatched by the first ship bound for any part of that country. The rates of postage were to be threepence a single letter within a radius of eighty miles, four

²¹ Minutes of council, Virginia, January 12, 1693, *Cal. St. P. Col., Am. and W. I.*, 1693-1696, no. 21; minutes of council, Maryland, September 24, 1694, *ibid.*, no. 1339.

²² Minutes of council, Maryland, *ibid.*, no. 1816.

²³ Hening's *Statutes at Large*, I. 436.

²⁴ Minutes of council, Virginia, *Cal. St. P. Col., Am. and W. I.*, 1693-1696, no. 20.

²⁵ Hening's *Statutes at Large*, III. 112; *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, 1659/60-1693, pp. 444-446.

pence half-penny outside the eighty-mile radius, and eighteen pence for each ounce weight. Public letters were to be carried free. No provision was made for postage on letters addressed to places beyond the limits of the colony, and it was expressly stipulated that the act did not confer a monopoly on Neale.

There is an engaging simplicity in the extent of the colony's requirements as compared with the limited character of its concessions. Neale at his own cost was to establish a postal system, comprising a general post-office at a place agreed upon and sub-offices to the number desired in each county. Couriers were to be available to take letters anywhere within the colony—without postage if on public business, at rates fixed by the colony if they were private letters—but no person need employ the post-office should other more convenient or cheaper mode of conveyance be available.

This act seems to have been adopted by the legislature before it was made aware of Hamilton's connection with the American post-office. When the council of Virginia were advised of Hamilton's appointment they opened communication with him. The notes of the correspondence as they appear in the minutes of council²⁶ do not give much information, but they show that Hamilton's proposition as submitted was not found to be acceptable, and as subsequent correspondence failed to remove the difficulties, matters remained as they were until Neale's patent expired. In 1710 the subject was reopened and the governor reported to the Board of Trade that he had been expecting a visit from Mr. Hamilton for the last two months, for the purpose of opening a post-office and connecting it with the other colonies. He foresaw a difficulty owing to the lack of a suitable currency, tobacco, which was the only specie, being, in the governor's words, "very inconvenient to receive small payments in and of very uncertain value".²⁷

The line of posts established by Hamilton extended from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Philadelphia, and mails were carried over it weekly each way.²⁸ The postage collected throughout British North America during the four years from 1693 to 1697 was £1456-18-3, an average of considerably less than £400 a year. The expenses during those years amounted to £3817-6-11.²⁹ The deficit fell upon Neale. But the business augmented rapidly, so that by the end of the sixth year, the revenue covered all the expenses

²⁶ Minutes of council, Virginia, May 25, November 10, 1693, October 19, 25, 1694, May 3, July 25, 1695, *Cal. St. P. Col., Am. and W. I.*, 1693-1696, nos. 371, 671, 1430, 1454, 1804, 1975.

²⁷ *Spotswood Letters* (published by Virginia Hist. Soc.), I. 22.

²⁸ Minutes of council, New Hampshire (*N. H. Provincial Papers*, 1686-1722, p. 100).

²⁹ Treasury, II. 256 (G. P. O. Record Room).

except Hamilton's salary.³⁰ In 1699 Hamilton went to England and joined Neale in an appeal to the Treasury.³¹ They made a particular point of the necessity of securing a complete monopoly of the over-seas conveyance, and of increasing the postage charges. The postmasters-general were favorable to the former proposition, but were of opinion that it would be well to weigh carefully before adopting the proposal to increase the rates.³² In the course of the discussion, an idea was thrown out by the postmasters-general which was eagerly grasped at by Neale and Hamilton. It was that there was much reason to doubt whether a post-office in the colonies in private hands could ever succeed as it would require all the authority of the sovereign to induce the colonial governments to acquiesce in the monopoly, which was the indispensable condition to success. Neale at once offered to surrender his patent to the government upon equitable terms.³³ After some delay the government resumed the patent, and carried on the post-office in the colonies under the terms of the patent.³⁴ Its fortunes were no better under the change of management. In 1709 there was a deficit of £200 and much discontent arose among the postmasters, as Queen Anne would not allow her losses to be augmented by paying their salaries.³⁵

In 1711 an act was passed by the British Parliament which affected profoundly not only the post-office of Great Britain but that of the colonies as well.³⁶ Owing to a variety of causes the act of Charles II., under which the post-office was operated, had become insufficient. The new act was comprehensive in its scope, embracing for the first time the postal arrangements of the colonies. The whole system throughout the empire was placed under the direction of the postmaster-general of England, who appointed his deputies for the different colonies. The act swept away the several head offices in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and replaced them by one principal office at New York,³⁷ to which all the others were to be subordinate. The charges for the conveyance of letters were no longer a matter of negotiation between the postal authorities and the local legislatures but were fixed by this act of the British Parliament. As one of the purposes of the act of 1711 was to raise money to help defray the expenses of the War of the

³⁰ *Cal. Treasury Papers*, 1697-1702, p. 289.

³¹ Treasury, II. 253 (G. P. O. Record Room).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 256.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

³⁴ Treasury, VI. 205 (G. P. O. Record Room). John Hamilton was appointed deputy postmaster-general by the crown in 1707.

³⁵ *Coll.*, Mass. Hist. Soc., third series, VII. 69.

³⁶ *Statutes of United Kingdom*, 9 Anne, ch. 10.

³⁷ New York did not become the centre of the postal system until a reconstruction of the department was made in 1772.

Spanish Succession, there was a general augmentation of the rates. Thus the charge on a letter from New York to Philadelphia was raised from four and one-half pence to nine pence; that on a letter from Boston to Philadelphia from fifteen pence to twenty-one pence. These charges were for single letters weighing less than one ounce. If a letter weighed over one ounce, the charges were fourfold those given.

The act also greatly enhanced the charges on letters passing over-seas. In place of the penny or twopence which Americans had been accustomed to pay the captains of vessels bringing to them the letters which their correspondents had deposited in the bags in the London coffee-houses, the post-office now exacted a shilling for a letter consisting of a single sheet weighing less than an ounce, and four shillings if it weighed as much as an ounce. The captains were also impressed with the necessity of co-operating with the post-office, by a heavy fine for any captain's failure to hand to the postmaster nearest his port of arrival all letters in his charge.

It is somewhat strange, and is perhaps evidence of a disposition on the part of Americans to accept the view enunciated later by Franklin that postal charges were not taxes, that only one colony made a remonstrance against this great increase in the postage. Virginia not only refused to pay the increased rates but countered effectively on the attempts of the post-office to enforce the statute. There was no postal system in this colony at the time this act came into operation. Nor did there seem to be any necessity for one. In 1699 Hamilton reported on the proposition to extend the colonial system southward to Virginia.³⁸ He gave it as his opinion that the desire for communication between the northern colonies and Virginia and Maryland was so slight that there would be scarcely one hundred letters a year exchanged, while the cost of the service would be £500 a year. Practically all the correspondence of these southern colonies was with Great Britain and Europe. In the autumn of 1717 the time was thought ripe for the inclusion of the two southern colonies in the colonial postal system. Postmasters were appointed in each colony, couriers conveyed the mails into several of the more populous counties, and a fortnightly exchange was arranged between Williamsburg and Philadelphia. This was satisfactory until the people learned what the charges were and what the monopoly of the post-office meant. Then there was a vigorous clamor of protest.³⁹ Parliament, they declared, could levy no tax

³⁸ Treasury, II. 253 (G. P. O. Record Room).

³⁹ Governor Spotswood to the Board of Trade, June 24, 1718. *Va. Hist. Coll.*, new series, II. 280.

upon them but with the assent of their assembly; and, besides, they maintained that their letters were exempt from the monopoly of the postmaster-general, because they nearly all, in one way or other, related to trade. This was putting an unwarrantably broad interpretation on an exemption, which appears in all post-office acts, in favor of letters relating to goods which the letters accompany on the vessels. It has always been the practice to allow shipmasters, carrying a consignment of goods, to deliver the invoice to the consignee with the goods, in order that the transaction might be completed with convenience. But the scope of the exemption is clearly defined and has never been allowed to include ordinary business letters not accompanying merchandise.

The Virginians however did not leave their case to the uncertain chances of a legal or constitutional argument. They set about nullifying the post-office act by an effective counter measure. The legislature brought in a bill which, while acknowledging the authority of the post-office act, imposed on postmasters certain conditions which it was impossible to fulfill and attached extravagant penalties for the infraction of those conditions. The postmasters were to be fined five pounds for every letter which they demanded from a shipmaster and which the statute exempted from the postmaster-general's exclusive privilege. Now every ship's letter-bag would certainly contain many letters relating to goods on board the ship, as well as many which had nothing to do with goods. But how was the postmaster to distinguish the letters he might rightfully claim for the post-office from those which came within the exemption? With a penalty of five pounds hovering over him for every mistake in judgment his position would be unenviable. Another clause in the bill contained a schedule so exacting that observance of it would have been impossible. In case of failure, which would frequently have been unavoidable, the bill provided a fine of twenty shillings for every letter delayed.⁴⁰ The bill was disallowed by the governor but the legislature achieved its purpose, as the deputy postmaster-general relinquished his attempt to establish a post-office in the colony. It was not until 1732, when the governor, Alexander Spotswood, became deputy postmaster-general, that Virginia was included in the American postal system.

With the exception of this episode, the period of forty years succeeding the act of 1711 produced little that is noteworthy. In 1721 a change was made in the relations between the postmaster-general and the post-office in America, in virtue of which the former

⁴⁰ *Journal of the House of Burgesses*, May, 1718, *passim*.

was relieved of all expense for the maintenance of the American service. On the withdrawal of the deputy postmaster-general, John Hamilton, who was a son of the founder of the American post-office, there were arrears of salary due him amounting to £355. In recommending Hamilton's claim for this amount to the Treasury, the postmaster-general stated that the post-office in America had been put on such a footing that if it produced no profit it would no longer be a charge on the revenue.⁴¹

The line of undistinguished administrators of the post-office in America came to an end in 1753 when Benjamin Franklin was made deputy postmaster-general jointly with William Hunter of Virginia. Besides being a man of pre-eminent practical ability, Franklin had had a large experience in post-office affairs.⁴² He had been postmaster of Philadelphia for sixteen years before his appointment to the deputyship, and for some time before had acted as controller for the whole postal service. The post-office at this time offered a fine field for Franklin's administrative ability. The service had been steadily declining for some years. It took six weeks to make the trip from Philadelphia to Boston and back, and during the three winter months the trips were made but once a fortnight. Franklin and his associate made the service weekly throughout the year, and had the time reduced by one-half.⁴³ There were a number of other improvements introduced. For a time the financial results offered little encouragement. In 1757, when the outlay reached its highest point and the public response to these efforts to accommodate them was still feeble, the post-office was over £900 in debt to the deputy postmasters-general. But the public did not remain unappreciative. Three years later this debt was wiped out and replaced by a surplus of £278. In 1764 the surplus reached £494, and this sum was transmitted to the general post-office in London. The receipt of this first remittance gave great satisfaction to the postmaster-general. For a generation past the post-office in America had been nearly forgotten. It had cost the Treasury nothing since 1721, and it had been allowed to plod along unregarded. Opposite the entry of the receipt in the Treasury Book are the words, "This is the first remittance ever made of its kind."⁴⁴ Thereafter the remittance from the North American post-

⁴¹ August 10, 1722. Treasury, VI. 206-207 (G. P. O. Record Room).

⁴² Franklin was appointed postmaster of Philadelphia in 1737, and deputy postmaster-general in succession to Colonel Spotswood. He was but little in America during his incumbency as deputy postmaster-general. He resided in London as agent for his province from June, 1757, until November, 1762, and from November, 1764, until his dismissal.

⁴³ "The Ledger-Book of Benjamin Franklin", in the Boston Public Library.

⁴⁴ Treasury Letter-Book, 1760-1761, p. 96 (G. P. O. Record Room).

office became an annual occurrence. In his *Autobiography* Franklin observes with pride that at the time of his dismissal the American office yielded a revenue three times that from Ireland.⁴⁵

Franklin's success, judged by reference either to the immediate past of the American service or to the contemporary British service, was remarkable. He showed an early grasp of the truth that monopoly alone does not assure prosperity, and that in order to gain business it was essential to make his service attractive to the public. For the first three years of his administration, the total revenue was £938-16-10; the revenue for 1757 alone was £1151, and this was about the normal revenue for some time. His method was the old simple one, familiar to all men of business. As already stated, he found on entering on his office that it took six weeks for a letter and its answer to pass between Boston and Philadelphia. He at once reduced this time by one-half. But this was not enough. At the beginning of 1764 the post-riders between New York and Philadelphia made three trips each way weekly, and at such a rate of speed that a letter could be sent from one place to the other and the answer received the day following.⁴⁶ In reporting this achievement Franklin stated that the mails travelled by night as well as by day, which had never before been done in America. He planned to have trips of equal speed made between New York and Boston in the spring of that year, and the time for letter and reply between the two places reduced from a fortnight to four days. When his arrangements were completed a letter and reply might pass between Boston and Philadelphia in six days.

It was during this period that the agitation which had been going on upon both sides of the Atlantic for regular packets devoted exclusively to the conveyance of mails was crowned with success. As the troubles which culminated in the Seven Years' War were approaching a head, an appeal was made to the British government by Governors Shirley of Massachusetts, De Lancey of New York, Dinwiddie of Virginia, and Lawrence of Nova Scotia, for a more regular means of communication between the mother-country and the colonies, so that help might be obtained, if required.⁴⁷ The appeal was vigorously supported by the Board of Trade, but the Treasury could not be induced to undertake the expenditure until their eyes were opened by the defeat of Braddock at Fort du Quesne. They were then quite in a mood to approve of a further

⁴⁵ *Works of Benjamin Franklin* (Federal ed.), I. 256.

⁴⁶ Franklin to Todd, January 16, 1764. Smyth, *Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, IV. 215.

⁴⁷ Public Record Office, C. O. 5.

representation of the Board of Trade made on September 18, 1755,⁴⁸ and the postmaster-general was directed that a line of packet-boats should make monthly trips between Falmouth and New York. The vessels employed were of two hundred tons burden, and carried thirty men. The conveyance of merchandise was forbidden. The service was a most expensive one and, when peace was concluded in 1762, the question of its continuance was at once discussed. During the seven years of its course, the New York service cost £62,603, while its revenue in postage was only £12,458. The service was popular, however, and as the efforts of the postmaster-general to lower the cost had been successful and hopes were entertained that the service would be self-sustaining before very long, the Treasury sanctioned the amended terms.⁴⁹

So far as its connections extended, this service was very satisfactory. All the services on the land routes north of Virginia were made subsidiary to the transatlantic service, and all the northern colonies had fairly close communication with the mother-country. But the southern colonies derived little or no benefit from the packets. To remedy this state of things an entire rearrangement of the southern service was made in 1764.⁵⁰ These colonies were withdrawn from the northern service altogether and with the Bahama Islands were erected into a distinct postal division with headquarters at Charleston. The packets from Falmouth, after calling at the West Indies, extended their voyages to Pensacola, Fort St. Augustine, and Charleston, before returning home. As this was found to be too long a route, it was resolved to break up the connection between the mainland and the West Indies, and to have separate monthly packets between Falmouth and Charleston. To secure the greatest measure of advantage from this service a courier was despatched to Savannah and St. Augustine with the mails as soon as they arrived at Charleston from England.

There were thus at the end of British rule in the American colonies three lines of sailing packets carrying mails between England and those colonies—one to New York, another to Charleston, and the third to the West Indies. There was still however a defect in the arrangements. They failed to provide connections between

⁴⁸ Public Record Office, C. O. Bundle 7.

⁴⁹ Treasury, vol. VIII. (G. P. O. Record Room).

⁵⁰ The first deputy postmaster-general for the southern division was Benjamin Barons, who was appointed December 19, 1764. Orders of the Board, II. 126 (G. P. O. Record Room). He resigned on August 26, 1766, and was succeeded by Peter Delancy. The latter was killed in a duel with Dr. John Hale, in August, 1771, and George Roupell was appointed in his stead. The last-named retained office until displaced at the Revolution. Orders of the Board, 1737-1770, II. 211 b.

the several colonial systems except through the mother-country. A letter from New York to Charleston or to the West Indies had to go to London on its way to its destination. To connect the two systems in the mainland, a courier travelled from Charleston to Suffolk, Virginia, where he met the courier from New York. The gap between the West Indian and continental services was filled by small forty-five ton vessels running from Jamaica to Pensacola, and Charleston.⁵¹

A complete survey of the postal service of the colonies in 1774 can be extracted from the *Journal*⁵² of the trip of inspection made by Hugh Finlay in that year. Finlay, who had been postmaster of Quebec since 1763, had just been promoted to the general surveyorship of the northern district. He travelled from Falmouth (now Portland) in the north, to Savannah in the south, inspected all the post-offices, and received communications of all kinds in the course of his journey. From this *Journal* it appears that there was only one route in the country—that between New York and Philadelphia—over which mails were carried as frequently as three times a week. From New York northward to Boston, and thence to Portland, the courier travelled twice weekly each way. Southward from Philadelphia to Suffolk, North Carolina, there was a weekly courier.

In passing from this northern district, which covered the full extent of Franklin's jurisdiction, to the southern district, which was under the control of another deputy postmaster-general, one is struck with the enormous difference between them. Although the service throughout the northern district in no way corresponds with what the greatly improved facilities make possible and even necessary to-day, it still afforded a basis on which improvements would naturally be made. This could not be said of the service in the south. From Suffolk to Charleston, there was a post-road four hundred and thirty-three miles in length. The couriers visited, on the way, the post-towns of Edenton, Bath, New Bern, Wilmington, Brunswick, and Georgetown. They left each end of the route once a fortnight, and took forty-three days to make the through journey. Of these forty-three days, twenty-seven were occupied in travel, while during the remaining sixteen the mails lay at connecting points on the route. The district south of Charleston as far as Savannah and St. Augustine had regular mails only once a month, the courier leaving Charleston on the arrival of the packet from England.

⁵¹ Treasury, vol. II. (G. P. O. Record Room).

⁵² *Journal kept by Hugh Finlay, Surveyor of the Post Roads on the Continent of North America, 1773-1774* (published by Frank H. Norton, Brooklyn, 1867).

While Finlay was in the south changes were taking place affecting not only his personal fortunes but the whole colonial postal system. Before he reached New York on his return, Franklin had been dismissed for his connection with the disclosure of the Hutchinson correspondence and Finlay had been appointed to succeed him.⁵³ Franklin was thus set free to place his ability and experience at the service of the colonials in the organization of their postal system. And steps were already being taken towards the establishment of such a system. In March, 1774, the committee of correspondence in Boston wrote to the committee in Salem suggesting that independent postal arrangements be set up, and introducing William Goddard as a suitable man for such an undertaking.⁵⁴ Goddard was the son of the postmaster of New London, and had himself been postmaster of Providence for a period of two years. His mission to Salem was successful, as the committee of that place, replying a few days later to the committee in Boston, declared that the act of the British Parliament establishing a post-office in America was dangerous in principle and demanded peremptory opposition. Goddard had a plan for an independent American post-office⁵⁵ which with the encouragement he received at Boston and Salem, he laid before the committees of correspondence in all the colonies. His proposition was that the colonial post-office should be established and maintained by subscription and that its control should be vested in a committee to be appointed annually by the subscribers. The committee should appoint postmasters and post-riders and fix the rates of postage. The immediate management was to be under the direction of a postmaster-general to be selected by ballot, who should hold his office by a yearly tenure.

But Goddard was not permitted to bring his plan into execution. In September, 1774, the delegates of the colonies assembled in congress at Philadelphia, and by degrees took upon themselves all the functions of government. The question of providing for the speedy and secure conveyance of intelligence was submitted to the congress on May 29 following,⁵⁶ and a committee, of which Franklin was the leading member, was directed to make a report. On July 26,⁵⁷ with the report of the committee before it, the congress resolved to appoint a postmaster-general for the united colonies, whose headquarters should be at Philadelphia, and who was em-

⁵³ Orders of the Board, January 31, 1774.

⁵⁴ March 21, 1774. Pickering Papers, manuscript, in possession of the Mass. Hist. Soc., XXXIX. 38.

⁵⁵ April 4 or 20, 1774. *Ibid.*, XXXIII. 75, 86.

⁵⁶ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, II. 71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

powered to appoint a secretary and as many postmasters as he considered proper. A line of posts should be established from Falmouth (Portland) to Savannah, with as many cross-posts as the postmaster-general thought desirable.

Goddard was a candidate for the position of postmaster-general, but Franklin was chosen. He then sought the secretaryship but disappointment again awaited him. Franklin selected his son-in-law, Bache, for the place. In recognition however of his services in organizing the colonial post-office, he was appointed surveyor of the posts.⁵⁸

Congress, after establishing the colonial post-office, debated the question of suppressing the existing or imperial postal system.⁵⁹ Much was said on both sides, but the question was settling itself more effectually in another fashion. As early as March, 1775, the postmaster-general in London notified his deputies in America that all that was to be expected of them was that they should act with discretion to the best of their judgment.⁶⁰ He ceased to give positive directions. Finlay, who at some personal risk had managed to get to New York, reported that the post-office was doing but little business as the rebels were opening and rifling the mails and were notifying the public that it was unconstitutional to make use of the king's post-office. Finlay foresaw that the post-office could not long continue, and he proposed that the work of distributing the mails should be done on one of the war vessels in New York harbor.⁶¹ At last, on Christmas Day, 1775, the post-office at New York gave notice⁶² that on account of the interruptions to the postal service in several parts of the country, the inland service would cease from that date, and thus was closed the royal post-office in the colonies.

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⁵⁸ *Am. Archives*, fourth series, VI. 1012.

⁵⁹ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, III. 488.

⁶⁰ *American Letter-Book*, 1773-1783, p. 62 (G. P. O. Record Room).

⁶¹ *Public Record Office*, C. O. 5: 135.

⁶² *Am. Arch.*, fourth series, IV. 453.